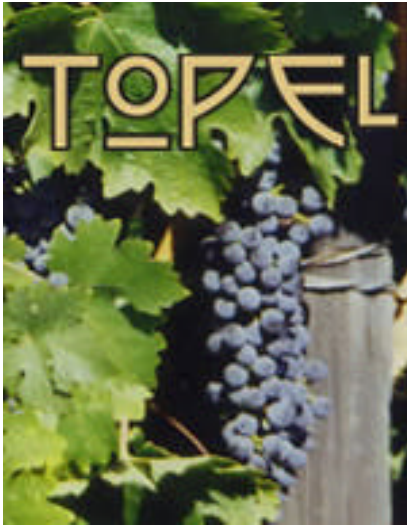


Topel: Unique Pinot Noir from a Cabernet Lover



Not too long ago I received an e-mail from Jane Young of Labrador Communications asking me if I would like to taste a Pinot Noir from Topel Winery. & Vineyards. Now Topel is not on my radar because it is primarily a Cabernet Sauvignon producer. However, Jane said the 2002 Pinot Noir was named Wine of the Week by the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* and I was intrigued.

Mark Topel (a Russian-Jewish name pronounced "Toe-pell") is a successful criminal defense attorney and his wife, Donnis, is a former pastry chef who once owned a well-known Berkeley dance studio. The story goes that he was in Napa on legal work and came across an old 160-acre sheep ranch at 1400 feet on the east side of Duncan Peak. Looking down into Hopland, it is in the most southeast corner of Mendocino County. Mark was intrigued because grapes had been grown here in the 1800s and he personally preferred the taste of mountain-grown red wines. A couple of knowledgeable wine people, Joel Peterson and Stu Smith saw the property and told him it was

ideal for growing Cabernet Sauvignon, although there was no other vineyards on the mountain. That was all it took.

In 1989 he began the rigors of clearing the land and planting a vineyard with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, and then Syrah. Today he has 32 acres of vineyards on a hillside which he farms organically. Mark and Donnis learned their winemaking from enology courses at U.C. Davis and the assistance of winemaker Nancy Walker. By 2000, Mark was doing most of the winemaking chores and producing a commercial quantity of attractive wine.

Mark released a Pinot Noir from the 2001 and 2002 vintage made from Monterey County grapes. He field crushed the grapes from hillside vineyards in northern Monterey County. The clones were a combination of Pommard, 667, 777, and 115 on 110R rootstock. Uniquely, the wine was aged for 32 months before release - 2months in new Francoise Freres barrels, then 2 years in neutral French oak., then 6 months in the bottle.

2002 Topel Serendipity Vineyard Monterey County Pinot Noir 14.4% alc., \$22.50, 405 cases) A very unique and interesting Pinot Noir. The nose is layered with cherries, spices (notably cardamom), and a little sauvage. The wine tastes terrific but is unlike any other California Pinot Noir I have ever had. It really stumped me when I tried to pin down the flavors but there was a load of stylish, complex spices here. This Pinot is nicely weighted and balanced, and a kick to drink.

No 2003 Pinot Noir was produced due to inadequate grape supply, but a 2004 Pinot Noir is slated to be released this summer.

Wines may be ordered from the website at www.topelwines.com.

